



# Places of Refuge Decisions

*Public affairs challenges.*

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The ship is a wreck. It is listing badly, spilling oil, and threatening to break up and sink. It needs a place of refuge, and the master wants to bring this potential disaster into your port. You and your public affairs team have a significant challenge ahead.

## The Challenge

The 2005 Canuslant exercise participants tackled this type of situation in Bar Harbor, Maine. Canuslant is the U.S./Canadian biennial exercises of the Atlantic Geographic Annex to the joint maritime pollution contingency plan. Held at the picturesque College of the Atlantic, the exercise explored places of refuge through education, breakout groups, a tabletop exercise, and equipment deployments. The 150 participants focused on the decision-making process, Gulf of Maine response capabilities, assessment criteria, and obstacles to success.

Public opposition was rapidly identified as a serious potential obstacle to the successful resolution of a place of refuge situation. Captain Mike Balaban of Transport Canada reminded the participants that the places of refuge concept has a long maritime tradition. Heading for the nearest safe harbor has always been a natural response to a crisis at sea.

Today, however, ships typically carry large amounts of oils and hazardous materials that can foul a shoreline. Responders and the public have a greater sensitivity to the environmental consequences of a spill, resulting, in some cases, in denial of refuge to a stricken vessel.

The International Maritime Organization's resolution A.949 (23), *Guidelines on Places of Refuge for Ships in Need of Assistance*, adopted December 5, 2003, notes that: "when a ship has suffered an incident, the best way of preventing damage or pollution from its progressive deterioration would be to lighten its cargo and bunkers; and to repair the damage. Such an operation is best carried out in a place of refuge." The guide, however, continues by acknowledging that "to bring such a ship into a place of refuge near a coast may endanger the coastal State, both economically and from the environmental point of view, and local authorities and populations may strongly object to the operation."

The balancing of risks to the vessel and its crew, and to the coastal community is a key issue in places of refuge decisions. The IMO guide states that: "granting access to a place of refuge could involve a political



**A finback whale skull at the College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, Maine. LCDR Benjamin Benson, USCG.**

decision which can only be taken on a case-by-case basis with due consideration given to the balance between the advantage for the affected ship and the environment resulting from bringing the ship into a place of refuge and the risk to the environment resulting from that ship being near the coast."

Given a place of refuge request, technical experts first must tackle the incident specifics: What is the situation? What are the stresses? What is the weather? Where can they get to? What resources are endangered there? What assistance is available there?

The U.S. and Canadian Coast Guard, salvors, and maritime professionals know how to tackle such risk assessments, and, through exercises like Canuslant and plenty of real-world cases, they are well-practiced at finding cooperative solutions. Their task may be daunting, but they will get the job done. They will find a logical, defensible, best option.

With this best option in hand, the next action is to gain the needed support to implement this option. NIMBYism (not-in-my-backyard) is the great challenge. Even the best solution, if poorly presented, can leave one trying to do the right thing against all the forces an impassioned community can muster.

#### **Tabletop Exercise Scenario**

Dr. Sean Todd, of the College of the Atlantic, briefed Canuslant participants regarding the dynamics of the Gulf of Maine. "This is one of the best places in the world to see marine mammals. They come here to get wet and fat."

The gulf, which runs from Cape Cod, Mass., to the Bay of Fundy, Canada, and out to Georges Bank, includes three climatic zones. Most critically to the places of refuge issue, Dr. Todd noted that the currents run around the gulf like "a giant washing machine." Thus, a major pollution incident will not be isolated. Further, as the fish and whales do not recognize international U.S./Canada boundaries, international cooperation is necessary. "If you're going to solve this problem, you must have all stakeholders," Dr. Todd pointed out, "and you've done that here."

In the Canuslant tabletop exercise scenario, a tanker carrying gasoline from Canada to Boston was struck midships by a dry bulk carrier. The bulk carrier could continue its voyage, while the tanker had a breached hull, was leaking oil, and needed a place of refuge.

The U.S. and Canadian participants quickly figured out that the vessel was in U.S. waters and that the nearest potential place of refuge was the exercise location, beautiful and environmentally sensitive Bar Harbor, Maine. The urgency was raised by nasty weather coming from the southeast.

#### **Public Affairs Response**

Before tackling this public affairs challenge, the incident command should focus on the communication needs, lest you find yourself talking without a purpose. The purpose here is to garner support and cooperation to implement the technical solution determined to be best. The response also needs to mitigate local NIMBY impulses. Overall, public confidence in the organization needs to be preserved.

According to public relations theory, the open-systems approach is the most effective public relations model.<sup>1</sup> The correlation of the open-system approach to greater satisfaction with the public affairs results was recently empirically shown in a study of Coast Guard Marine Safety Offices following the September 11, 2001, attacks.<sup>2</sup>

An open-system organization effectively interacts with its environment (the public) and is oriented toward growth and development. The organization's public relations function takes input from the public and reconciles it against the organization's desired relationships with the public. The organization takes this information and responds to reconcile differences. The open organization communicates with its public and adjusts itself and its goal states to maintain an equilibrium.

The system builds and maintains public confidence as the public not only sees the organization being open about what it is doing, but also being receptive to the public's concerns. An organization perceived as hiding its activities, or even worse, disregarding the public's concerns, may suffer a long-term loss of confidence. If the public does not trust that the organization will be open about activities that could affect them, and if they do not believe their concerns will be taken seriously, they may resort to any number of methods to protect their self-interest, other than cooperating with the organization.

It was evident that the Canuslant participants recognized the inherent public affairs challenge. Not only did the topic come up regularly in discussions, public affairs issues were included in many of the breakout groups' reports.

The public communications breakout group saw the purpose of communications as preparing the environment for successful operations. The group tackled:

- segmenting audiences and messages (determining who the audiences are and what messages are appropriate for each); and
- choosing the right level of engagement (actively engaging versus a more passive approach).

#### **Segmenting**

There is no general public. The fishing community does not





**Rear Admiral David P. Pekoske, left, then Commander, First U.S. Coast Guard District, and Mr. Larry Wilson, Assistant Commissioner, Canadian Coast Guard, Maritimes, observe the CANUSLANT 2005 equipment deployment. LCDR Benjamin Benson, USCG.**

have the same concerns as shippers. Residents of a coastal community will have different concerns than port business employees. National and international environmental groups have yet another set of interests. In a places of refuge situation, these audiences, their concerns, and how they typically receive their information (media, influencers, civic groups, etc.) need to be determined. Local knowledge is a great source, as is a review of local media. This review should not only attend to the loudest voices, but should try to identify and attend to the lesser media, such as blogs or even graffiti. The responders might be asked to pay attention and advise the public affairs staff of anything relevant that they see or hear. This is the listening part of public communications.

Messages then need to be both tailored and targeted to these specific audiences. Coastal residents may need information on preparations to protect them from a spill. Shippers will want to know about waterway access issues. Fishermen will have their own concerns. Some will worry about economic risks, while others may see economic opportunity.

Each tailored message must not conflict with the other messages. Anticipate that people in one group will attend to the messages you give to other groups. Further, your audience will include people who belong to multiple categories. Address your target audience directly, but remember the other audiences are also listening.

A goal of places of refuge messaging is to turn “us-them” thinking into “we” thinking. A community may get the

impression that they are expendable and have been chosen to “take the bullet.” The use of pre-established contingency plans and cooperative efforts with the stakeholders, such as a unified command, helps by showing that a reasonable process was used to choose the course of action and that the community is not being excluded from decision making.

Showing that the organization is prepared for negative outcomes is important. However, too much emphasis on prevention may increase the perception of danger. Audiences who see the preparation without fully understanding the situation may think: “If they are doing so much to protect us, it must be really bad.” The goal is to educate and realistically reassure, without belittling or alarming.

### **The Right Level of Engagement and the Dangerous Temptation to Keep Quiet**

In Canuslant, the level of engagement decision was one of the trickiest addressed. While there can be no NIMBY response if the publics do not know what is happening, the most awful public wrath may be conjured if things go badly in secret.



**Sculpture at the College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, Maine. LCDR Benjamin Benson, USCG.**

Not communicating is never a good option. The public communications breakout group, however, noted that who to communicate with, at which level, and at what time in the event’s lifecycle should be considered strategically. Key players, those with a need to know, including certain political leaders, must be engaged early. The incident command needs to have agreement on the communication plan with them. A more passive approach with the clear concurrence of local key players may be appropriate, if the negative event risks are deemed low enough. Not creating undue alarm is an appropriate consideration. This is a case-by-case judgment





call upon which the parties need to agree.

Given the risks of appearing secretive, the default position must be to publicize the activities. The danger in doing less outreach lies in a public perceiving that they are being subjected to a hazard without their consent or even knowledge. Such a perception can lead to both opposition in the immediate case and a long-term deterioration of trust. Another risk of communicating less is that government secrecy is itself news. Being perceived as secretive on a public safety issue can become a much bigger problem than the places of refuge situation alone. Such negative impressions may lead to abandonment by some key players the response depends on.

If the key persons agree to a lower level of engagement, the incident command still needs to be ready to speak about the issues openly if and/or when the story breaks. Plain sight activities, easily apparent to the casual observer of the operation, must be considered. Bringing an unusually large vessel with visible damage into a small port will be noticed. Do not try to deny the obvious; it will only ruin your own credibility. A public affairs failure can sink your best plans; the open-system approach is your safest bet.

#### Table Top Exercise Resolved

The Canuslant tabletop exercise led to some tough soul searching and decision making. At one point, the U.S. representatives went up to Canada—just upstairs to the library—to cooperatively develop the needed best option. This is the type of cooperation a places of refuge situation demands.

Pros and cons of various places to bring the ship along the Gulf of Maine were carefully weighed. Finally, with a sigh of relief, the participants concurred. Given the approaching

storm, the vessel would be best served, and the whole Gulf of Maine would be best protected, if the vessel sought refuge in St. Mary Bay, Nova Scotia.

At the close of the table top exercise, the public affairs challenge of preparing the environment for successful operations was only beginning. A places of refuge situation provides unique challenges to port authorities. While tack-



**Rear Admiral David P. Pekoske, right, then Commander, First U.S. Coast Guard District and Mr. Larry Wilson, Assistant Commissioner, Canadian Coast Guard, Maritimes, center, get a briefing on the exercise equipment deployment from John J. Dec, First Coast Guard District, Marine Safety Division. LCDR Benjamin Benson, USCG.**

ling the technical problems, the players need to agree on a reliable public affairs plan to enable implementation. There lies the challenge. Doing it well brings success.

***About the author:** LCDR Benjamin Benson, First District Public Affairs Officer, started his career at boat units and as an Aviation Survivalman. After Officer Candidate School, he served in Port Operations, Inspections and Investigations. He wrote his thesis on ICS and Public Relations at San Diego State University, earning his masters in communications.*

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See Cutlip, S. M., Center, A. H., & Broom, G. M. (2000). *Effective public relations* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. See also the discussion of the two-way symmetrical model in Grunig, L. A., Grunig, J. E., & Dozier, D. M. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organizations: A study of communication management in three countries*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>2</sup> See the author's master's thesis: *The Incident Command System's Effect on Public Relations Excellence* at <http://babenson.home.att.net>.

